

How does Europe defend itself properly?

Saul Benglemann, 4 June 2025, Probus.

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In order to answer the question, “How does Europe defend itself properly?”, I believe we need to answer the following eight questions:

1. Has Europe learnt anything from its two world wars? Is lasting peace possible in Europe?
2. What does defending today's Europe mean?
3. Where and who could be today's and tomorrow's threats to Europe?
4. What would be Europe's new defence strategy?
5. Where could NATO fit in Europe's new defence strategy?
6. What would be the proper cost of building up Europe's defence?
7. Is there a case against a full-scale rearmament of Europe?
8. What can be done to reduce the threat to Europe? What are the alternatives to war?

1. Has Europe learnt anything from its two world wars? Is lasting peace possible in Europe?

When I came to the UK in 1972 to study, Europe to me was the world's most peaceful continent. People of different language and culture coexisting peacefully and happily in a relatively small continent.

Over 50 years later, I now seriously wonder whether Europe has learnt anything from its last two world wars. Is lasting peace possible in Europe?

Over the last 500 years, Europeans fought with each other in countless small wars almost every year and in ten large wars. In total, these had cost the lives of over 100 million Europeans.

After WWII, it seemed Europe had entered a period of perpetual peace, ignoring the Cold War with the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons pointed at each other. The 47-year peace in Europe was broken almost straight after the demise of the Soviet Union. First, it was NATO vs Serbia in the Bosnian Conflict in 1992 and then it was Russia vs NATO via proxies in the Ukraine Conflict in 2022. Both of them were in violation of the UN Charter. It's too early to tell whether the Ukrainian Conflict will end in a stalemate like the Bosnian Conflict.

So, the question arises: (a) does Europe try to regain the peace that it enjoyed for nearly five decades or (b) does it rearm itself and return to a future of perpetual wars?

2. What does defending today's Europe mean?

Europe is a continent in the Northern Hemisphere and mostly in the Eastern Hemisphere, based on the Greenwich Meridian. It is the second smallest continent and has 10% of the world's population. There are 50 sovereign states in Europe that are members of the UN. There are five de-facto states, not recognised by the UN, such as Kosovo. There are six non-sovereign territories, such as Gibraltar and Jersey. There are three areas of special sovereignty, such as Northern Ireland and Svalbard. It is, therefore, not at all easy to define geographically what Europe means when we are talking about

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defending Europe.

For example:

- Are we defending just Western and Central Europe? What about the parts of Europe that fall in Russia and in Turkey?
- Are we defending those states that are part of the EU plus the UK? What about the other 20 European states, not including Russia and Turkey, that are not part of the EU, such as Iceland, and Norway that are definitely part of Western Europe?
- Are we defending states beyond the continent of Europe, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, i.e. ex British settler colonies or dominions, excluding Trump's US? They are geographically definitely not part of Europe. So, on what basis should we aspire to defend these far away lands? Certainly, their threat landscape will be very different to those in Europe.

The defence of Europe, whatever Europe means, is a strange and unique concept. There are no other regions in the world with multiple states seeking to defend the region rather than their individual states. Almost all other sovereign states use their own military to defend themselves, except perhaps Costa Rica. A sovereign state such as Bangladesh, where I come from, uses its own own military for its defence. It certainly doesn't depend on Mother India's military to protect its sovereignty.

Sovereignty gives a state the power and authority to rule itself and to protect and defend it from internal and external threats. While Europe's internal threats are protected by the police authorities of the states themselves, its external threats are protected by a military alliance called NATO controlled effectively by the US.

NATO was created in 1949 to counter the threat from the Warsaw Pact forces of the Soviet Union. But, despite the disbandment of the Red Army and the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO still exists. Russia, of course, sees the NATO alliance as a threat to its sovereignty. Could this be the reason why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022? More on this later.

3. Where and who could be today's and tomorrow's threats to Europe?

Given the geography of Europe, it is not at all difficult to predict where any land-based threats to this territory may come from. This will be from the east, which is Russia. The south-east is protected by Turkey acting as a buffer against the Middle East.

The UK, by the way, faces no land based threat as it is surrounded by water. Beyond these waters are friendly countries highly unlikely to be its potential enemies.

So, how credible is the Russian land-based threat along Europe's eastern border? Ukraine forms a huge buffer against Russia along this border. No wonder, Russia has been complaining for years about NATO wanting to expand into Ukraine.

Russia, of course, can easily invade Finland and the small Baltics states. But it has not done so or

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threatened to do so in the last 20-30 years. How feasible is it for Russia, with an economy the size of Spain's, to manage a full-scale invasion of Europe, beyond the third of Ukraine it currently occupies? The mainstream media will have you believe Russia is almost at the doorstep of Western Europe.

4. What would be Europe's new defence strategy?

Any war involving nuclear weapons will quickly result in the destruction of both the attacker and the attacked. So, nuclear weapons should only be used as a deterrence.

The rest of Europe's new defence strategy will be based on non-nuclear weapons, including both its defensive and offensive capabilities. However, any strategy that relies on overwhelming offence or first strike capability is likely to lead to an escalation with an opposing power. Such a strategy could lead to a war and therefore should be avoided.

What, then are likely to be the weapons of modern defensive warfare? Based on Ukraine and Gaza, tomorrow's wars will certainly involve drones and a lot of AI. Armies will still be needed. But the use of large armies in warfare is likely to decrease. Tomorrow's battlefield environments are going to be too dangerous for humans to play a part in large numbers. It will be increasingly difficult to protect them from autonomous war machines. Humans will, however, play a critical support role in the background. Future wars, therefore, will be a war of machines.

In my opinion, full-scale warfare, even at the non-nuclear level, will become futile. It will lead to immense destructions if long range missiles, including hypersonic missiles, are used, whether launched from the land, air, sea or under the sea. It would make much more sense, therefore, to avoid engaging in such wars, even if one plans for one.

5. Where could NATO fit in Europe's new defence strategy?

Some defence experts believe that NATO should have been dissolved in the early 90s and replaced with an European defence force. In today's world, with the US in seeming retreat from Europe, the role of NATO meeting Europe's security needs is becoming increasingly questionable.

6. What would be the proper cost of building up Europe's defence?

During the Cold War period, Britain spent nearly 5% of its GDP in defence. After the end of the Cold War, it dropped to 2%. If NATO is no longer going to be our primary defence, we might need to increase it to 2.5-3% for a number of years to build back our defence capability, including developing our own and independent new technologies. The same applies to the rest of Europe.

The money would be expected to come out of the tax paid by the citizens of each state. This would need to be balanced against other critical internal needs of the states, such as maintaining the health of its aging population, welfare for its growing poor, protection against increasing climate change, etc. These costs are expected to grow in Europe. Hence there will be less and less money left for defence.

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Note, however, that it does not make sense to associate a state's defence budget with GDP. Threats to the state do not move up and down according to our economy. Each European state will need a detailed economic assessment of its defence needs. We can then calculate how much additional tax citizens will have to pay and for how long to build up our defence.

7. Is there a case against a full scale rearmament of Europe?

Having had NATO for so many years, Europe has always dreaded the thought of going it alone without the US. Not having to pay for the full cost of its own defence, Europe has got used to spending more on their other needs. The thought of asking tax payers to now pay more to meet increased defence costs, is a great concern. Europe's citizens will not accept coughing up more tax. But who is going to ask the citizens of Europe? The EU Commission or Council? The EU lacks the institutional mechanism to raise taxes in the constituent states of the EU. The only way the EU Commission can find the money for the rearmament is to divert the money already allocated to other needed projects, such as social and infrastructure projects.

The other worry is that rearming could fuel the far-right forces across Europe. These forces can bring down the EU itself. A greater threat to Europe may, therefore come from the inside than from the outside.

8. What can be done to reduce the threat to Europe? What are the alternatives to war?

A military threat is not the only external security threat Europe faces. The climate threat is likely to become much greater by the next decade. As a result of severe climate change, human migrations from Africa may become an unbearable problem for Europe. As for internal threats, the aging of European populations will impact Europe's ability to defend itself.

In the longer term, the burden of maintaining a large defence will be unbearable. We have to find ways to reduce the burden. Europe will need to start talking about conflict prevention, diplomacy and the use of soft power rather than hard power. Warfare should always be the last resort in resolving an external conflict.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude with the following general points:

- In the natural world, perpetual aggression exists only amongst those animals classed as wild, such as lions and tigers. Humans, in general, are not savages.
- Peace and security can coexist. Peace is not the antithesis of Security.
- But security is a fundamental need and cannot be traded off by appeasement.
- However, security can be achieved by means other than engaging in a full-scale war.
- It is not possible to win and survive against an enemy with nuclear weapons.

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- The emotional need to have enemies can be an entrapment, making us think and behave irrationally. It can be used by our governments through mainstream media to divert our attention from more urgent problems.
- Weak and undemocratic leaders rely on this fear.
- Peacebuilding measures cost relatively little but require strong leadership. This includes talking to our enemies.
- Economic dividends from peace can be greater than benefits from wars.
- In the last 80 years, aggressors have rarely won full-scale international wars, whether against their neighbours or against nations far away. Bosnia and Ukraine have resulted or are resulting in stalemates.
- It is not irrational for a country to build up its defences if they are not at par with those of its potential enemies.
- But, a race to outdo a potential enemy's military can lead to a full-scale war.
- In the past, great nations that depend too heavily on military power have always fallen.

Footnote

Europe's major wars in the last 500 years were:

1. Italian Wars, 1494-1559, France gains Calais from the English, Spain over Sicily, Naples, Milan and Sardinia, 0.5 million dead.
2. Eighty Years War, 1566-1648, Dutch gain independence and part of the Portuguese colonial empire; 1 million dead.
3. Thirty Years War, 1618-1648, France gains Alsace, Sweden gains part of north-eastern Germany, Prussians gain part of Poland, Swiss gain independence, religious conflict, 8 million dead; German population declines by 50%.
4. Great Turkish War, 1683-1699, Habsburg monarchy gains Hungary, Transylvania and the Balkans, Russians capture the port of Azov, Italians gain Dalmatia, 0.5 million dead.
5. War of the Spanish Succession, 1701-1714, Spain cedes the Netherlands and Italy, British gains Gibraltar, 1 million dead.
6. Seven Years War, 1756-1763, British gains N. America and Caribbean possessions from the French and Florida from the Spanish, Spanish gains southern US from the French and Cuba from the English; 1 million dead.
7. The Napoleonic Wars, 1803-1815, Coalition of British/Habsburg/Russians/Prussians/Ottomans defeat the French and their Spanish and other allies, 4 million dead.
8. Crimean War, 1853-1856, Russians against the Ottomans, supported by the French & British, Russia accepts defeat. Conflict between Catholics and Orthodox Christians, Modern technologies used in war. 165,000 dead.
9. WWI, 1914-1918, Germans and Turks against French, British and Russians, Allied powers win, 17 million dead.
10. WWII, 1939-1945, Germans and Japanese against British, American and Russians, Allied powers win, 73 million dead.